

SAKHAROV AND SOLZHENITSYN AS SPIRITUAL LEADERS
OF THE POST-WAR RUSSIAN DISSIDENT MOVEMENT

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Abstract

This essay concentrates on two representatives of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and in the 1970s—Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The essay introduces the history of the dissident movement in the Russian Empire under the Tsars and in the Soviet Union under various leaders, mainly under Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev and Michael Gorbachev. It presents the historical conflict of Slavophiles and Westernizers that began in the time of Peter the Great and discusses its impact on Russian thinkers over the years.

The essay proposes that Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov are representatives of two branches of Russian philosophy, modified with time: Slavophilism and Westernism. Solzhenitsyn is presented to be a person with Slavophilic tendencies, while Sakharov is presented to be an advocate of the Western model of development for Russia. The essay discusses their paths to dissidence and their opposition to the Soviet regime. It also provides a comparison of their views and ideas. The essay attempts to follow the

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chronological order of their lives. In the end it provides a brief overview of their recent actions, based on their ideas, drawn from Slavophilism and Westernism...

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 the world changed dramatically. The Cold War ended and the threat of communism ended in Europe. Such Eastern European countries as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and others stopped being Soviet satellites. "East and West Germany, meanwhile, were moving rapidly toward unification."¹ But this was not the end. In November 1991 the Soviet Union, "the evil empire" that had kept the democratic and non-democratic world in fear and strain for almost seventy years disappeared. It left fifteen independent republics, with Russia being the largest one. Russia, out of all the former Soviet bloc states and the former Soviet Union, was the first one to fall to Communism. But also it was the last one to liberate itself from it despite all the controversy going on inside Russia such as the three-day-coup of August 1991 by Brezhnev-era hard-liners. These transformations, though painful sometimes, were unexpected and startling. There could be many explanations for why Communism was being abandoned: America's and NATO's successful containment policies; the arms race bankrupting Moscow, and "mostly it was the objective fact that Communism is a rotten system."² But even such reasons would have never been enough if the human beings in the oppressed countries stayed passive. However, the human spirit can never be destroyed and there is always an opposition to the existing regime whatever it is. In totalitarian societies such as Nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy dissent was outlawed and dealt with brutally. In the Soviet Union, another totalitarian state, the opposition also was always illegal until the collapse of the empire with the brief exception of Alexander Kerensky's provisional government in 1917.

The dissident movement had a long history of persecutions in Russia starting from Czarist times when great national poets and writers such as Alexander Pushkin, Michael Lermontov,

Leo Tolstoy and Fyodr Dostoevsky suffered from censorship which extended to their brilliant works. It also had two major branches: the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. The split in Russian society began in the times of Peter the Great (1672-1725), who reformed the administration of the state in a way unknown before to Russian people. His reforms touched almost every aspect of Russians' life through the introduction of European styles and traditions which Peter I learned during his year-long stay in Holland and England. Ever since then the intellectual movement was divided in the two major groups of thinkers—Westernizers and Slavophiles. “Westernizers were those who believed that the traditional Russian ways of life could be a bitter handicap, and the sooner Russia caught up with the West the better. The Slavophiles, influenced by the German romantics, opposed westernization and idealized Russia's distinctiveness.”³ One of the brightest events of the dissident movement of the 19th century was the Decembrist revolt in December of 1825, when a group of Russian army men tried, without success, to abolish Tsarist rule by refusing the oath of allegiance to a new Tsar, Nicholas I, and forcing him to abdicate. “The Decembrist conspirators were of liberal inclinations, and their background was Russian freemasonry and the Russian army.”⁴ That revolt can be seen as the first sign of the major revolution to follow and that is why it is important despite its failure. It was the first attempt to change the existing order in the Russian Empire. The revolts after it were also unsuccessful until World War I, which served as a powerful catalyst for deep change.

The Bolshevik Revolution was supposed to bring changes to many aspects of Russian people's lives. And it did bring a 99% literacy rate, the development of heavy industry, urbanization of the former agricultural country with absolute monarchy and feudal laws and many others. But it did not bring freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly. Stalin tried his best to eliminate even the slightest possibility of any kind of dissidence—through purges, show trials, concentration camps and massive brain-washing on completely government-controlled media. But everything has its end and so did Stalin—he died in 1953 and other people took over: Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid

Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Andrei Chernenko and at last Mikhail Gorbachev. Under these Soviet leaders the situation of domestic suppression vacillated from loosening up to tightening again, but fortunately none of them managed to crush the human spirit as much as Joseph Stalin did.

During the end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s the dissident movement in Russia started expanding more and more, rapidly touching mostly the upper intellectual classes of the Soviet society along with the scientific circles. Andrei Sakharov is now known in Russia and abroad as having been the leader of Soviet dissidents starting from the 1960s until his death in 1989. As he writes in his memoirs: “The years 1965-1967 were a turning point in my life. I was heavily involved in demanding scientific work, even as I was approaching a decisive break with the establishment.”⁵ His decision to join the Russian dissident movement was a heavy stroke against a Soviet government which promoted propaganda about the unity of thought in the Soviet people—scientists and artists; factory workers and peasants, and so on. Sakharov was not an ordinary man—by that time he was a famous physicist, one of the creators of the Soviet hydrogen bomb and a greatly respected member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Sakharov’s impact on Russia’s democratic development is enormous—for many years his voice was believed to be Russia’s conscience and hope for the democratic future. He is by no means less respected in Russia than Alexander Solzhenitsyn whose extraordinary literary works won him the honor of being the first writer to speak openly about the horrors of the concentration camps, the now infamous Gulags. The political views of the two men differed from each other, although they both opposed the Soviet regime. These differences went back to the old argument between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles in the 1840s—1860s. Sakharov perceived the happiness of Russia as following the Western model of social and economic development while Solzhenitsyn was dissatisfied with Western ways, finding them too materialistic and lacking essential spirituality.

Both of the men were against the Soviet regime, though they came to that opposition in different ways. In February 1945 Solzhenitsyn, who was an artillery officer during World War II, got arrested by the Soviet counterintelligence for criticizing Stalin in his letters to a friend. He was sentenced to eight years and was sent to a labor camp. There he saw and experienced himself the plight of Ivan Denisovich in *One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Oleg Kostoglotov in *Cancer Ward*. In 1954 after his sentence was finished, Solzhenitsyn began to write. His writings coincided with the period of the thaw under Nikita Khrushchev who was the first Soviet leader to denounce the crimes of Stalin. In the realm of the new policy some of Solzhenitsyn's novels were published. In November 1962 *Novy Mir*, a Soviet journal which had a progressive-minded editor-in-chief, Aleksandr Tvardovsky at that time, published *One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

In 1963 the same courageous journal published more of Solzhenitsyn's stories: "Matryona's House," "The Incident at Krechetovka Station" and "For the Good of the Cause." But that was the end of it. On 14 of October 1964 Khrushchev was freed from his duties as the Communist Party Secretary General by the Politburo and the thaw was over. This state of affairs affected Solzhenitsyn's status immediately: in late 1964 all his works including the manuscript of *The First Circle* were seized by the KGB. Solzhenitsyn began protesting right away. In 1967 he wrote two letters to the Union of Soviet Writers, the only organization that could possibly, and was supposed to, support the Soviet writer's rights. In the letters he demanded the abolition of censorship, the rehabilitation of writers killed during Stalin's purges and the restoration of his papers confiscated by the KGB. No reply followed despite protests and meetings: it was obvious that the writers did not want to or were simply afraid to spoil relations with governmental officials.

The reaction of the Writer's Union did not change with the years; in fact it only got worse as an indicator of Solzhenitsyn's difficulties with the government. On November 4, 1969 he was expelled from the Writer's Union which meant losing even the

formal status of a Soviet writer. Western writers and Soviet dissidents publicly protested his expulsion from the Writer's Union and the banning of his books. From that time on none of his works was published in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s—they were considered anti-Soviet.

It is not surprising that Solzhenitsyn could not endure the banning of his books silently. For him to be a writer was to be the voice of a nation; strict censure, according to Solzhenitsyn's moral principles, was a crime against morality. Writers had to be speaking out and expressing the concerns of the people. Solzhenitsyn described what he thought the writer's mission is in his "Nobel Lecture on Literature"—"This is in essence the position of writers: the spokesmen for their national language—the principle tie binding together a nation, binding together the very Earth occupied by a people, and in fortunate cases their national soul also."⁶ With such vision it must have been unbearable for him to see the corrupt Writers' Union, an instrument of the government acting at its very command. Breaking up with the official writers' circles meant going into the underground: from a radical and progressive but publishable writer Solzhenitsyn turned into a nonconformist whose novels were not recognized.

For Andrei Sakharov the way to dissidency was quite different. For years, he remained one of the leading scientists working over the creation of the hydrogen bomb. On November 22, 1955 the Soviet hydrogen bomb was tested in a remote part of Siberia. The sense of triumph that proved that all these years of work had not been fruitless was mixed with other feelings, "perhaps chief among them a fear that this newly released force could slip out of control and lead to unimaginable disasters."⁷ Being the eyewitness of the testing of the H-bomb had a great influence on Sakharov's thinking. After that he fully realized that the scientists among whom he belonged and who created this terrible destructive weapon had no control over its use whatsoever. More than that, the biological effects of the testing of nuclear weapons, such as radiation, which is dreadful to DNA, were either ignored or deliberately underestimated. Sakharov wrote that: "Whenever I

tried to explain that the issue is the total, cumulative dose for the whole of mankind—since this factor determines the overall number of victims of non-threshold biological effects, people either failed to understand or scolded me for being too ‘abstract.’”⁸ Political confrontation with the West played the major role in the decision-making of the Soviet government. Khrushchev needed to prove to the United States, Great Britain and to his own hard-liners at home that the USSR was increasing its military power and he resumed testing in 1961 after the few years of moratorium.

Andrei Sakharov was strongly opposed to a resumption of testing: “During the 1950s, I had come to regard testing in the atmosphere as a crime against humanity, no different from secretly pouring disease-producing microbes into a city’s water supply.”⁹ He sent a note to Khrushchev in which he warned him against testing. This provoked their confrontation and Sakharov was not listened to. The further testing continued in 1962.

In the 1960s Sakharov was becoming more and more concerned with the dangers that thermonuclear weapons possessed. In 1966, MAD—mutually assured destruction—was achieved and the possibility of the destruction of the whole world became a fact of life. Sakharov continued attending conferences where strategic warfare, the production and application of delivery systems, and nuclear weapons were discussed. He wrote in his memoirs: “I could not stop thinking about this, and I came to thinking that technical, military, and economic problems are secondary; the fundamental issues are political and ethical. Gradually, subconsciously, I was approaching an irrevocable step—a wide-ranging public statement on war and peace and other global issues.”¹⁰

In 1968 Andrei Dmitriyevich Sakharov took his major step of historical significance—he published *Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*. There he wrote about the crimes of Stalin, denounced the personality cult and asked for the full disclosure of his crimes; warned about ecological catastrophe and the dangers of the arms race and especially, thermonuclear weapons; he argued for “convergence, for a rapproche-

ment of the socialist and capitalist systems that could eliminate or substantially reduce these dangers, which had been increased many times over by the division of the world into opposing camps. Economic, social and ideological convergence should bring about a scientifically governed, democratic, pluralistic society free of intolerance and dogmatism, a humanitarian society which would care for the Earth and its future, and would embody the positive features of both systems.”¹¹ In June of that year a copy of the essay was given to the correspondent of a Dutch newspaper. And a few days later the BBC reported the extraordinary event: the Soviets’ leading physicist called for disarmament, rapprochement with the West and a humanitarian society for the Soviet Union. A month later Sakharov was asked to reject all the main statements of his essay because they were discrediting the Soviet state. When he refused, he was forbidden to go back to the Installation, which meant getting fired, and he was ordered not to leave Moscow.

The ideas expressed in the essay were in many ways similar to the moral vision of Solzhenitsyn. The humanitarian society was Solzhenitsyn’s wish as well; in fact all his writings denounced the violence and aggression of the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. “Solzhenitsyn conceives of the Soviet people as inmates of closed systems in which all are sentenced and condemned, usually unjustly and without legal recourse or appeal, and in which all are doomed. Incarcerated in penal colonies, condemned to exile, isolation, loneliness, illness and death, all his characters are at the mercy of cruel and implacable institutions and of the vicious and violent who run them.”¹² And there is no escape except the solidarity that the oppressed provide to each other. It has become the theme going through almost all Solzhenitsyn’s writings about concentration camps. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn makes his main character a person able to keep his honesty and dignity despite the consistent and deliberate efforts of the system to crush every human feature in its inhabitants. Ivan Denisovich shares with Alyoshka, the Baptist, the last food he has. When put into perspective, this simple act can be considered without a doubt a gesture of unreserved generosity.

The story is, itself, fascinating because it had been Solzhenitsyn's own experience that made it possible for him to describe in detail the one day of Ivan Denisovich Shukhov out of his eight years in the concentration camp. The extreme severity of their hardships can be observed in Solzhenitsyn's novel: "The narrator describes conditions in the camp detail by detail: the early start of the work day in the complete darkness and frost of a Siberian winter night, the cold of the prisoners' barracks, their starvation diet, and the brutality of the authorities."¹³ The depth of degradation of the prisoners in the camp is startling. When Ivan Denisovich sees "...a young fellow who was crossing himself before he started to eat," Shukhov is surprised by this as something extraordinary to happen in the concentration camp and, therefore, concludes: "Must have been a Western Ukrainian and new to the place. The Russians didn't even remember which hand you cross yourself with."¹⁴ Western Ukraine had been annexed recently by the Soviet Union, and that is why the Western Ukrainians had not reached the level of dehumanization of the Russians who had been under the Communist rule since 1917. The writings of Solzhenitsyn were denouncing the regime for enslaving and suppressing its population, but the situation with human rights in the country was not getting any better. In fact, the actions of the government were only provoking further indignation in the dissident human rights movement.

In 1970 Sakharov, along with Yuri Zhivluk and Valentin Turchin, wrote "an appeal to the leaders concentrating on a single key issue, the introduction of democracy and intellectual freedom as essential for the advancement of science, and thus for improved economic performance."¹⁵ The same year Sakharov entered the world of dissidents by meeting with Valery Chalidze and delivering a complaint to the Procurator's Office which was protesting against Pyotr Grigorenko being sent to a psychiatric hospital. Grigorenko was defending arrested Crimean Tartar activists who wanted to come back to Crimea, their homeland from where they were deported to the Far East under Stalin. Sakharov also became involved in efforts to save the biologist Zhores Medvedev who had been taken by force to a psychiatric hospital for his writings.

Solzhenitsyn publicly denounced Medvedev's detention but the actions of the two men stayed separate from one another. The Human Rights Committee was Sakharov's and his co-sponsors' other accomplishment. It was established in November of 1970 and in December of 1970 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn joined it as well. On July 1971 the Committee denounced the misuse of psychiatry and went on discussing and fighting for the basics of human rights: freedom of religion, freedom of movement and freedom of speech.

In 1973 Sakharov gave an interview to Scandinavian radio and television correspondent Olle Stenholm in which he supported *détente* with the United States because it reduced tensions and the risk of war, but warned the West against letting the USSR achieve military superiority since it was "a closed, totalitarian society capable of dangerously unpredictable actions."¹⁶ After that interview the Soviet press launched an anti-Sakharov campaign. Letters and articles denouncing Sakharov appeared in all the leading Soviet newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and *Literaturnaya gazeta*, signed by workers, academicians and other individuals. In 1974 Sakharov went on his first hunger strike, the aim of which was to call attention to the conditions of political prisoners in labor camps and psychiatric hospitals. It took place in June in order to coincide with Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union. In February of the same year Solzhenitsyn was sent into exile in West Germany. He made public statements denouncing the Soviet regime; however, the main reason for the exile was the publication in the West of the first volume of *Gulag Archipelago*, a story describing the society of *zeks* (prisoners of the concentration camps).

In 1975 Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The laureate was not permitted to go to receive it himself, and his wife, Elena Bonner, spoke for him at the Award Ceremony in Oslo. It is interesting to note that five years before that on October 9, 1970, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was also given the Nobel Prize for literature, provoking the Soviet press to launch a campaign against him. He was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda; his works were condemned for "distorting the image" of the Soviet way of life. In

November, Solzhenitsyn announced that he was not going to Stockholm and the prize was awarded without his presence. Therefore, both of the men were forced not to go to receive the prize. Such prevention was not new in the Soviet Union: in 1958, the great Russian writer Boris Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for his masterpiece, *Doctor Zhivago*, and had to reject the prize due to extreme domestic pressures. In the cases of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn the idea of the Soviet authorities was probably the same: through massive media campaigns and domestic persecutions to make them abandon their awards.

In December 1979 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. It was an illegal action on all counts: the official propaganda was that the Afghanistan government invited Soviet troops to defend the Afghan people from Pakistan's interventions. In reality, the KGB assassinated Afghan President Hafizullah Amin and installed a puppet government, which had no support from the Afghan people. According to the historian Paul Johnson: "Amin was murdered two days later, together with his wife, seven children, a nephew and twenty to thirty of his staff."¹⁷ Therefore, the real reason was Soviet expansionism and the strategic location of Afghanistan, the control of which could give USSR dominance in that region. "At the time and since, the Soviet venture into Afghanistan was compared to American involvement in Vietnam, a miscalculation which turned into a disaster and shocked national self-confidence."¹⁸ In January Sakharov protested against the invasion in interviews given to *Die Welt*, the *New York Times* and ABC. On January 22, 1980 his car was stopped on a street and he was taken to the Procurator's Office. In a few hours he and his wife, who was allowed to accompany him, were sent to the city of Gorky where they stayed in exile until 1986. They lived in a four-room apartment without a phone, forbidden to leave the city and to meet any dissident individuals and foreigners unless given special permission.

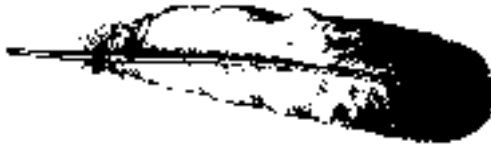
In 1986 Sakharov's situation changed positively. Mikhail Gorbachev, becoming the leader of the Soviet Union, adopted his new policy of liberalization of the Soviet system, *glasnost* and

perestroika. This led to the end of Sakharov's exile in Gorky: the telephone was unexpectedly installed on December 15, 1986 in their apartment and the next day they received a call from Gorbachev in which he said that Andrei Sakharov was free to go to Moscow. This was a great and joyful event that gave hope to many people behind the Iron Curtain. Sakharov continued his battle for peace and democracy: he participated in the Forum for a Nuclear-Free World, for the Survival and Development of Humanity; put strong efforts to investigate the bloody conflict in Nagorno Karabakh between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in 1988; and was elected to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies in 1989. There Sakharov became one of the leaders, if not the leader, of the progressive-thinking part of the deputies, and was one of the founders of the Interregional Group which later on consolidated the democratic movement in Russia. Sakharov perceived these changes as the first sign of rapprochement with the West and of building a democratic society in his country. At first Solzhenitsyn also welcomed the changes occurring in the Soviet Union. The relaxation of censorship led to the publication of *Gulag Archipelago* in the literary magazine *Novy Mir*. A year later he was given back his Soviet citizenship. In May of 1994 Solzhenitsyn came back to Russia. He gave many interviews, meeting with people in different regions of Russia, and he criticized the work of the government. It turned out that he did not want the development of capitalism in Russia as in the West because during his years of exile he became disillusioned with the Western way of life. Sakharov, in his turn, did not live to see the development of capitalism in Russia. He died in 1989.

Sakharov's death in 1989 brought grief throughout the Soviet Union and even the rest of the world. Many events have occurred since his death—the collapse of the Soviet Union, free elections in the newly independent republics, including Russia, and many others. But the views and values which he expressed in *Moscow and Beyond* remain valid: “The main and constant ingredients of my position are the idea that the preservation of peace is indissolubly linked to the openness of society and the observance of human rights, as formulated in the *Universal Declaration of*

Human Rights, and the conviction that only the convergence of the socialist and capitalist systems can assure a fundamental and lasting solution to the problem of peace and the survival of mankind.”¹⁹

Solzhenitsyn’s fate has been quite different. After his return to Russia it became evident that his views, though also opposing the previous Communist regime, were not the same as those of Sakharov. In December of 1995 he joined the Congress of Russian Communities, a highly nationalist group that wants a strong central government, a big army and protection for domestic firms. Most probably, Solzhenitsyn’s views were influenced by his disillusionment with the West and his faith in Russia’s own way of development. Therefore, it appears that the competition between Westernism and Slavophilism has come back to Russia after the end of Communism, with Andrei Sakharov representing the first movement and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the second one.



Notes

- ¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, Rise to Globalism (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) p. 368
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 362
- ³ James Westwood, Endurance and Endeavour (Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 46
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33
- ⁵ Andrei Sakharov, Memoirs (New York: Alfred Knopf Inc., 1991) p. 267
- ⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (New York: Bantam Books, 1963) p. 35
- ⁷ Sakharov, Memoirs, p. 193
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 225
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 268
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282
- ¹² Abraham Rothberg, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Major Novels (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971) p. 12
- ¹³ Andrei Kodjac, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (no location, Twayne Publishers, 1978)
- ¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn, p. 15
- ¹⁵ Sakharov, Memoirs, p. 300
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 386
- ¹⁷ Paul Johnson, Modern Times (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1983) p. 719
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 719
- ¹⁹ Andrei Sakharov, Moscow and Beyond (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1991) pp. 36-37

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